

TRANSITIVITY AND ERGATIVITY IN ENGLISH AND ARABIC

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Abstract:

The main objective of this study is to investigate and contrast the transitive and ergative verbs in English and Arabic languages. It also shows the similarities and differences regarding transitivity and ergativity. This study comprises eleven sections: introduction, objective of the study, questions of the study, significance of the study, transitivity versus ergativity, English ergative verbs, Arabic ergative verbs, analysis (comparison) and finally a conclusion.

Keywords: *transitive verbs, ergative verbs, arguments, nominative case, accusative case.*

1. Introduction

No doubt English and Arabic are two different languages. English belongs to Germanic family while Arabic belongs to Semitic family. Therefore, their syntactic systems are dissimilar. Even though English and Arabic are different languages but they share some properties regarding universal grammar. According to Chomsky (1986:19-56) universal grammar is innate to human being and species specific. According to him and his followers in Transformational Generative Grammar is to find a theory of Universal Grammar. It is supposed that Universal Grammar must tell us about the nature of possible grammar of natural languages. It tries to find the principles which delimit the nature of human language.

2. Objective of the Study

The main objectives of this study are:

- a. To investigate the syntactic properties of transitive and ergative verbs in English and Arabic.
- b. To investigate the semantic properties of transitive and ergative verbs in English and Arabic.
- c. To find out the similarities and differences regarding both languages.

3. Questions of the Study

This study tries to answer the following questions:

- a. What are the main syntactic properties of transitive and ergative verbs in English and Arabic?
- b. What are the main semantic properties of transitive and ergative verbs in English and Arabic?
- c. What are the main similarities and difference between English and Arabic?

4. Significance of the Study

The significance of the study might be summarized in the following points:

- a. This study would shed some light on the phenomenon of transitivity and ergativity in both languages.
- b. It might also help lexicographers and translators of both languages.
- c. From pedagogical point of view, it might help teachers and learners of both languages.

5. Data Collection

The following sources are used to collect data:

- a. Arabic monolingual dictionaries.
- b. Arabic English bilingual dictionaries.
- c. The data incorporated in the relevant studies.

6. Methodology

This study is a descriptive one. It depends on syntactic, semantic and morphological analysis.

Sentences in English and Arabic are contrasted and analyzed thoroughly regarding transitivity and ergativity in English and Arabic.

7. Transitivity Versus Ergativity

It is a common knowledge in grammar, the verb that has an object is called a transitive verb. Therefore, we dare to say that an object is a must in transitive construction. As a matter of fact, the verb in English can be classified into two main types; the transitive and intransitive verbs. The transitive verb can also be further classified into monotransitive which needs only one object and ditransitive which needs two objects. According to Hale and Keyser (1986) ergative construction is a result of certain verbs which share specific features of meaning. According to Lyons (1971) the term "ergative" is a Greek word which means "cause", "bring about" or "create". It is noteworthy to indicate that the ergative verb can play the role of transitive and intransitive verb (Mahmood, 1991). One of the prominent features

Of ergative construction is that the object of the transitive construction corresponds to the subject of the ergative construction. Consider the following English examples:

- 1- a- The window broke.
- b- They broke the window.
- c- The window was broken.

Let us examine the three versions of construction (1), we find that there is a kind of close relationship between construction (1-a) and construction (1-c). They look syntactically and semantically the same. Surprisingly, they are not so. Construction (1-a) is an ergative construction, whereas construction (1-c) is a passive one. Semantically, two readings can be understood from construction (1-a). The first reading is whether the "window" broke by itself for a certain reason. The second reading is whether there is someone or something behind the breaking of the "window". If we examine again construction (1-a) and (1-b) we find that the subject of the intransitive construction in (1-a) becomes the object in transitive construction in (1-b). According to Halliday (1967:47) construction (1-a) is "process oriented" which means that the emphasis is on the event rather than the "doer" of the action. Whereas construction (1-b) is "agent oriented" which means that the emphasis is on the doer of the event.

8. English Ergative Verbs

To illustrate the process of English ergative constructions consider the following data:

- 2- a- The cook burnt the food.
- b- The food burnt.
- 3- a- The sun melted the snow.
- b- The snow melted.
- 4- a- The pirates sank the ship.
- b- The ship sank.
- 5- a- The boy changed the lock.
- b- The lock changed.
- 6- a- The kids spilt the juice.
- b- The juice spilt.

It is obvious that constructions (2-a), (3-a), (4-a), (5-a) and (6-a) are transitive constructions. They have two arguments in each structure. The 'cook' and the "food" are the two arguments of construction (2-a). The "cook" is the interior argument, whereas "the food" is the exterior argument. "The sun" and "the snow" are the two arguments of construction (3-a). "The sun" is the interior argument, whereas "the snow" is the exterior argument. "The pirates" and "the ship" are the two arguments of construction (4-a), they are the interior and exterior arguments respectively. For construction (5-a) "the boy" and "the lock" are its arguments. "The boy" is the interior arguments and "the lock" is the exterior argument. "The kids" and "the juice" are the two arguments of constructions (6-a). "The kids" is the interior

argument and □the juice□ is the exterior argument.

Constructions (2-b), (3-b), (4-b), (5-b) and (6-b) are ergative constructions. The verbs □burnt□ in (2-b), □melted□ in (3-b), □sank□ in (4-b), □changed□ in (5-b) and □spilt□ in (6-b) are ergative and intransitive verbs as well. Each construction consists of monadic verb (one verb only) and only one argument. According to the data analysis above, we dare to say that ergative construction exists in English language.

9. Arabic Ergative Verbs

Almutaawa□ah verb is the nearest equivalent label for ergative verbs in Arabic (Hassan,1996; Wafi, 2004).Regard the Arabic data below:

- 7- **a-ħaraqa** a-□□abbaxu al-laħma.
burnt the cook-Nom. the meat-Acc.
'The cook burnt the meat.'
b-iħtaraqa al-laħmu
burnt the meat-Nom.
'The meat burnt.'
- 8- **a-aħabt** aššamsu a alja
melted the sun-Nom. the snow-Acc.
'The sun melted the snow.'
b-ħaba a alju
melted the snow-Nom.
□The snow melted□
- 9- **a-aqraqa** al-qara□inatu assafinata
sank the pirates-Nom. the ship-Acc.
'The pirates sank the ship.'
b-qaraqat assafinatu-sank the ship-Nom.
'The ship sank.□
- 10- **a-gayara** al-waladu al-qofla
changed the boy-Nom. the lock-Acc.
□The boy changed the lock.□
b-tagayara al-qoflu
changed the lock-Nom.
'The lock changed.'
- 11- **a-sakaba** al-waladu al-□asira
Spilt the boy the juice
'The boy spilt the juice.□
b-insakaba al-□a□ira
spilt the juice
'The juices spilt.□

It is clear that constructions (7-a), (8-a), (9-a), (10-a) and (11-a) are transitive constructions, since they have two arguments in each structure. □a□□abbaxu□ (the cook) and □al-laħma□ (the meat) are two arguments of construction (7-a). □aššamsu□ (the sun) and □a alja□ (the snow) are the two arguments of construction (8-a). □al-qara□inatu□ (the pirates) and □al-safinata□ (the ship) are the two arguments of construction (9-a). □al-waladu□ (the boy) and □al-qofla□ (the lock) are two arguments of construction (10-a). □al-waladu□ (the boy) and □al-□asira□ (the juice) are the two arguments of construction (11-a).

Constructions (7-b), (8-b), (9-b), (10-b) and (11-b) are ergative constructions. The verbs □iħtaraqa□ (burnt) in (7-b), □ħaba□ (melted) in construction (8-b), □qaraqat□ (sank) in (9-b), □tagayara□ (changed) in (10-b) and □insakaba□ (spilt) in (11-b) are ergative and intransitive verbs as

well. Every construction consists of monadic verb and only one argument.

10. Analysis (Comparison)

According to the data above, there is a kind of similarity between the English constructions in (2-6) and the Arabic constructions in (7-11). Virtually, English constructions are not morphologically marked while Arabic constructions depend on case marking. It is clear that the English transitive constructions and their ergative constructions are identical. According to the data above, Arabic ergative verbs are marked morphologically with the prefix *ih*, *ta* and *in*.

Since Arabic depends on case marking, the ergative verbs are marked with the suffix of nomination *u*, and in the transitive verbs with suffix of Accusation *a*. On one hand, functionally, the transitive constructions (7-a, 11-a) consist of subject, verb and an object. Semantically, they consist of two noun phrases and a verb phrase. On the other hand, the ergative constructions (7-b, 11-b) consist of a subject and a verb. Semantically, they consist of a noun phrase and a verb phrase. To conclude, the syntactic and semantic ergative phenomenon exists in English and Arabic with slight difference regarding the language different systems.

11. Conclusion

It is a common sense, that language is a universal phenomenon and each language has its own system, however, they have similarities and differences regarding universal grammar. As it is clear that this study is an attempt to investigate and contrast the linguistic phenomenon of transitivity and ergativity in English and Arabic. According to the data above, the findings of this study have shown that the two languages exhibit significant similarities and differences regarding the syntax and semantics of transitive and ergative verbs.

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Appendix

The Phonemic Symbols used to Represent the Arabic Data in the Study are Listed bellow with their Arabic Graphemes.

/b/	Voiced bilabial stop	//ب/
/t/	Voiceless dento-alveolar	/ت/
/□/	Voiceless dento-alveolar emphatic stop	/ط/
/d/	Voiced dento-alveolar stop	/د/
/□/	Voiced dento-alveolar	//ض/
/k/	Voiceless velar stop	//ك/
/q/	Voiceless uvular stop	/ق/
/ʔ/	Voiceless glottal stop	/ء/
/□/	Voiced alveo-palatal	//ج/
/h/	Voiceless pharyngeal	/ح/
/□/	Voiced pharyngeal fricative	/ع/
/f/	Voiceless labio-dental	//ف/
/θ/	Voiceless dental fricative	//ث/
/ð/	Voiced dental fricative	/ذ/
/□/	Voiced dental emphatic fricative	/ظ/
/s/	Voiceless dento-alveolar fricative	/س/
/□/	Voiceless dento-alveolar fricative	/ص/
/z/	voiced dento-alveolar fricative	//ز/
/ʃ/	Voiceless	//ش/
/x/	Voiceless uvular fricative	/
/gh/	Voiced uvular fricative	/غ/
/h/	Voiceless glotal fricative	/ه/
/r /	Voiced alveolar flap/trill(when geminate)	//ر/
/l/	Voiced alveolar lateral	/ل/
/j/	voiced palatal glide	/ي/
/w/	Voiced bilabial round glide	/و/
/i/	High front vowel	□
/a/	Low front vowel	-
/u/	High back round vowel	□